Submission No 77

INQUIRY INTO GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF THE POWERHOUSE MUSEUM AND OTHER MUSEUMS AND CULTURAL PROJECTS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials (AICCM)

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The Chair,

Select Committee on the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales,

Parliament of NSW

Inquiry into the Government's management of the Powerhouse Museum and other museums and cultural projects in New South Wales

SUBMISSION TO THE ENQUIRY ON BEHALF OF AICCM, NSW DIVISION

On behalf of my professional organisation, the NSW division of Australian Institute of Conservation of Cultural Materials (AICCM), I wish to make a submission to this committee. AICCM is the professional organisation of conservators in Australia, comprising and representing conservators in all fields of materials conservation.

There has been much unease and discussion within our profession regarding:

- risks to the Powerhouse collection displayed in the Parramatta precinct including issues with the building design, temperature and humidity management, pest egress, vulnerability of the collection and building to flood and its effect on the building

- the consequences of the proposed move of the Museum of Applied Art and Sciences ("the Powerhouse") from its current location in Ultimo to a proposed site in Parramatta ("The Powerhouse Precinct")

- the consequences to the collection of moving some of the collection to Parramatta and the Discovery Centre in Castle Hill, and possibly to other organisations within the state

Risks posed by the site:

Flood risk

The Stage 2 Design Brief touches on the risk of flooding of the site. The map on page 172 shows that the majority of the site will be inundated by a 1 in 100 year flood. With climate change, we have came to understand that extreme weather events will occur with greater severity and regularity than recorded in earlier meteorological data. This is illustrated by the floods that affected Queensland in 2010/11.

While the damage affected much of the state, I would like to point to the effect that flooding had to cultural organisations on the Brisbane River. The State Library of Queensland was closed for a period of 3 weeks with damage sustained to grounds and building[1] while the Gallery of Modern Art and the Queensland Art Gallery were closed from 11th January to 16th of February[2].

While this flood was not the highest recorded in Brisbane in the last hundred years (5.45m in 1974), it is also nearly half the height of the greatest flood heights recorded in Brisbane of over 8.35m recorded in 1841 and 1893[3]. Climate change has shown that we cannot rely on 'old' measures of risk to forecast forthcoming risk.

This shows that floods much lower than expected 100 year maxima with have a significant effect on foreshore cultural institutions. There is a loss of use of buildings for weeks, the cost of cleaning, making good damage to infrastructure, making the site safe as well as the loss of public confidence in how collection can be safeguarded.

Selecting a flood-prone riverside site for a museum not only places the collection within the building at risk from inundation but from the subsequent risks of damage from raised/ variable humidity and temperature and possible failure of electrical systems such as Heating/ Ventilation/ Air Conditioning and security systems.

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1 http://www.floodcommission.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/file/0008/6884/Australian_Library_and_Information_Assn_and_Qld_Public_Libraries_Assn.PDF accessed 17/5/2020

2 https://www.qagoma.qld.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/163435/annual_report-2010-2011.pdf

3 Robin C. van den Honert * and John McAneney *The 2011 Brisbane Floods: Causes, Impacts and Implications* Published in Water 2011, 3, 1149-1173 https://research-management.mq.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/16832889/mq-19234-Publisher+version+%28open+access%29.pdf Accessed 17/05/2020

Loss of local heritage

Page 175 of the Stage 2 Design brief address the demolition of local heritage - Willow Grove and St George's Terrace. These Victorian buildings a rare in an area characterised by post WW2 and later development.

No case has been made for the demolition of these buildings and destroying built heritage goes against the spirit of the creation of the Powerhouse in Ultimo, where existing heritage structures were incorporated into the project and remain fundamental to the Museum.

The destruction of these buildings cannot be supported.

Loss of access

According to page 138 of the Stage 2 Design Brief, the Powerhouse Precinct is supposed to "Give increased access to the internationally significant Museum Collection". The Brief makes much of access to the site by residents of the region between Parramatta and the Blue Mountains and south west.

The proposed site is less than 25km west of the current Powerhouse Museum site in Ultimo and both lie on the major east-west train corridor in Sydney. The image on page 61 shows the proximity of the Powerhouse Museum to Sydney's major transport hub of Central Station and Railway Square. It is also clear that by relocating to Parramatta, people living in southern Sydney, the South Coast, Sydney's northern suburbs and the Central Coast will be disenfranchised. For people in these areas, access to the Powerhouse will be diminished - completely against the brief itself.

In terms of access to the collection, the reduced size of display space in the Parramatta Powerhouse Precinct means that less of the collection is accessible to visitors. The intended move of most of the collection to the Discovery Centre in Castle Hill further reduces public access to the collection due to its location. The site is not on mass transit routes. Access for people from the "Western City" to the collection of the Powerhouse Museum is diminished by the proposed relocations.

For these reasons, the argument that relocating to the Powerhouse Precinct gives greater access to the collection is seen to be incorrect.

Risks posed by building design/ specifications:

The Stage 2Design Brief (page 4) makes clear the required outcome "...a building that is *capable of meeting* Australian building codes, standards and delivery capabilities, as well as *international museum standards*." (my italics)

The passive phrase "capable of meeting" rather than an active voice of " *building that will meet* "Australian building codes, standards and delivery capabilities, as well as international museum standards." is telling. It infers that these standards are not necessarily mandatory.

Additionally, there is no-one with museum experience present on the jury nor apparently involved major decision-making processes. The lack of anyone to speak for the needs of a museum in this process would indicate that this process is not committed to create a world class museum, but having a museum as one of many changing sources of entertainment on the site.

Porosity

Porous is word constantly used in the Stage 2 Design Brief. In a museum context, it has many meanings, such as easily passed through. It can also mean that air, water vapour, dust and pollutants as well as pests and the risks attendant on them. These are all agents of deterioration for museum objects. Placing collections in areas where they are subject to deterioration is poor stewardship and endangers the long-term preservation of collections.

Mixed use of spaces

Spaces within the building are designed to have multiple functions and uses. Page 16 of Stage 2 Design Brief describes public events with food and beverage in collection areas. In other parts of the document it describes that " Consideration should be given to how multiple food and beverage offerings will contribute...".

The preparation, service and consumption of food and beverage in collection areas will attract pests such as insects, rodents and birds[4] which are an existential threat to museum collections.

In museums where food and beverage is available in cafes or where food can be brought in by visitors for consumption, great care has to be taken to ensure all food scraps are removed on a daily basis. Wherever possible, food service loading areas, transport routes, preparation/service areas and garbage storage are located separately from collection areas to prevent pests being attracted to collection areas.

[4]Suzanne Ryder *Food management in museums and historic houses as part of an IPM programme* 2016. JoNSC 4, pp.30-33 https://www.natsca.org/sites/default/files/publications/JoNSC-Vol4-Ryder2016.pdf Accessed 17/05/2020

Further on in the Brief (page 130), presentation spaces are described as having "...sufficient back-of-house space to be flexible for a range of uses, including catering, dressing room, technical preparation or Collection management". This again brings risk to the collection by bringing them into situations where they may be at risk instead of sequestering the collection away from non-collection activities.

Page 242 of the Brief notes that separate lifts for general goods/ waste and Collection/ artefact lifts are required. However, it does not spell out whether these materials will share loading docks and transport routes within the building. If they are not separated, this poses a risk to collections passing through "unclean" areas and affording the chance for pests to infest collection objects and transfer to other objects.

Exhibition spaces

The Urban Guidelines (page 138) describe "...state-of-the-art exhibition spaces..." without any definition of what this entails in terms of lighting, heating/ ventilation/ air conditioning (HVAC), pollution and dust controls. This speaks to a lack of commitment to a museum space that satisfies the need to safely display collection objects.

Climate controlled spaces to international museum standard in the Powerhouse Precinct will be approximately one quarter of what is currently available at the Ultimo site. This, again, speaks to reduction of access to the collection.

The brief makes it clear that collections will be displayed in some spaces that do not have appropriate climate control. For instance, one space is cooled only without any humidity control. In periods of warm weather and high relative humidity, such as in summer in Sydney, this space would be cooled.

There is a direct relationship between the amount of moisture that can be held by the air (relative humidity) and temperature. Cooling warm, moist air causes the relative humidity to increase, affecting organic materials, encouraging mould growth and the corrosion of metal. If the temperature drops below the dew point, moisture can condense on surfaces, causing further damage.

Mechanical management of environment

The discussion of environmental controls in the document indicates a lack of understanding of what is required in a museum environment.

While no clear reference is given, it appears that Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) Notes 10/4 Environmental Guidelines for Paintings[5] was consulted to describe air conditioning systems. On page 235, the parameters of AA standard HVAC systems are listed with their emphasis on "Precision control, [and] no seasonal changes as if this is the preferred option. Two pages later (page 237), the document specifies "[t]he Collection spaces at the Museum, along with the associated circulation delivery and workshop spaces adhere to the following for the appropriate conditions for preservation of collection and storage as endorsed by the ICOM – ICC Declaration Sept 2014 AICCM Environmental Guidelines 2018 and the Bizot Green Protocol" without any understanding of the differences between the two protocols.

Furthermore, there is internal conflict in the document where some collection areas and workshop spaces are designated "A" or "H" in one part of the document, only to fall under the ICOM-ICC Declaration conditions in others.

Lighting

While the Brief (page 241) notes that:"Daylight should be minimised, and UV excluded in areas displaying or housing light-sensitive Collection material.", this seems to infer that if collections on display are not considered light sensitive may be exposed to ultraviolet light. Further, the phrase "daylight should be minimised" infers that there will be no guarantee that objects will be protected from daylight.

Light damage can affect a wide variety of materials, with the results usually irreversible and often causing significant change in appearance and sometimes structure of museum objects.

Consequences of the move:

As the Powerhouse has been one of Australia's leading cultural organisations, it has also been the site of the development of a cohort of highly skilled and influential conservators. The museum's wide variety of collections and materials has resulted in a group of people who are familiar with ability to preserve these collections; their combination of specialities is often beyond what is available to many other cultural institutions - particularly the combinations of costumes and textiles, large technologies and design/development and materials research.

[5] https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/conservation-preservation-publications/canadian-conservation-institute-notes/environmental-display-guidelines-paintings.html Accessed 17/05/2020

This group of conservators has provided training and mentoring for emerging conservators who go on to work in other institutions in NSW, other parts of Australia and the world.

The current plans have no provision for conservation to be undertaken in the Parramatta Precinct. This will mean that there is no conservation oversight of the collection which will already be in risky circumstances due to the design of the building. Any incidents involving the collection cannot be attended to or managed by conservation staff with the understanding of the object and how damage can be managed or mitigated.

It is my understanding that plans to have a suitable conservation facility in the Discovery Centre have been shelved. This will mean that there are no facilities for conservators in its main storage area.

This will mean that the current cohort of conservators will be without a designated location, leaving them vulnerable to loss of their jobs. Once the corporate knowledge held by the Conservation staff is lost, it may be impossible to replicate.

SUMMING UP

The Stage 2 Design Brief makes a good case for a multi-purpose public venue on the site of the Powerhouse Precinct in Parramatta. However, the addition of the MAAS collection on that site does not improve the proposal. It seems that addition of the MAAS collection to that location seems to be one of a list of attractions for the site as a place of amusement and consumption, "dumbing down" the role of a museum.

It reduces what portion of the collection would be visible to visitors, it places the collection at risk from inappropriate environments, pest egress, light damage and possible vandalism.

The Stage 2 design brief actually makes the case for another Powerhouse Museum in the Parramatta region in terms of cultural linkages. The region needs an institution that reflects it from the ground up. By relocating the Powerhouse Museum from Ultimo, existing linkages will be broken down and not replaced. By establishing an institution that reflects the region, rather than a transplant, stronger, local and durable connections can be made.

In terms of access, the proposed move to the Powerhouse Precinct reduces public access to the collection, in direct contravention to the stated aim of the project. This is in terms of them portion of the collection that could be seen at Parramatta, the loss of access for people from the Central Coast to the South Coast, and the increased difficulty in accessing the rest of the collection by moving it to the Discovery Centre or other locations.

The proposed move also puts at risk the body of Conservators at the MAAS whose particular skills are aimed at preserving this collection of national importance.

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